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FM AMEMBASSY TEGUCIGALPA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 8228
INFO RUEHZA/WHA CENTRAL AMERICAN COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE
RUEHBO/AMEMBASSY BOGOTA IMMEDIATE 1238
RUEHSN/AMEMBASSY SAN SALVADOR IMMEDIATE 1712
RUMIAAA/CDR USSOUTHCOM MIAMI FL IMMEDIATE
RUMIAAA/CDR USSOUTHCOM MIAMI FL//CINC/POLAD// IMMEDIATE
RUEAHND/CDRJTFB SOTO CANO HO IMMEDIATE
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC IMMEDIATE
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC//DHO-5// IMMEDIATE
RHMFISI/DIRJIATF SOUTH IMMEDIATE
RUMIAAA/HQ USSOUTHCOM J5 MIAMI FL IMMEDIATE
RUEKJCS/Joint STAFF WASHDC IMMEDIATE
RUEHLMC/MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE CORP WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE 0756
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC IMMEDIATE
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC IMMEDIATE
RHEHAAA/THE WHITE HOUSE WASHDC IMMEDIATE
RUMIAAA/USSOUTHCOM MIAMI FL IMMEDIATE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TEGUCIGALPA 000527

SIPDIS

BOGOTA AND SAN SALVADOR FOR DEPUTY SECRETARY'S TRAVELING PARTY

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/01/2018

TAGS: [MARR](#) [MASS](#) [MOPS](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [FAIR](#) [HO](#)

SUBJECT: IN REPOSE TO CRASH OF TACA 390, PRESIDENT ZELAYA CLOSES TEGUCIGALPA AIRPORT AND ANNOUNCES IMMEDIATE COMMERCIALIZATION OF AIRSTRIP AT SOTO CANO

Classified By: Ambassador Charles Ford

¶1. (C) Summary: Following the May 30 crash of Taca flight 390 in which 5 people were killed, President Manuel Zelaya immediately closed the Tegucigalpa airport at Toncontín and announced that commercial flights would be sent to the airstrip at Soto Cano, which houses U.S. Joint Task Force-Bravo. Despite the fact that all the working level people understand how complicated it would be to commercialize the airstrip and how long it would take, no one seemed brave enough to tell Zelaya that "the emperor has no clothes," except for the concessionaire who services Honduras' international airports and would be responsible for most of the work. Public announcements over the weekend continue to say that the base will be opened for commercial flights within 30 - 60 days, despite broad public opposition to this proposal, as the base is a dangerous two-hour ride from Tegucigalpa that would cost over USD 60 by taxi. Our public line will continue to be that the base belongs to Honduras, and we hope to get the Honduran Armed Forces (HOAF), civil aviation officials, international airlines, and business people to make the correct arguments, lest the USG be seen as the scapegoat. End summary.

¶2. (C) Following the crash of Taca flight 390 from San Salvador to Tegucigalpa on May 30, President Zelaya immediately announced the closing of Tegucigalpa's Toncontín airport for any plane that carries over 42 passengers (categories A and B could continue to land). Presidential Spokesman Raul Valladares announced that all aircraft in category C, D or higher would be authorized on an emergency basis to land at the airstrip at Soto Cano, 45 miles to the north, where the U.S. Joint Task Force-Bravo (JTF-B) is located.

¶3. (C) In a meeting with the Ambassador on May 30, President Zelaya told us that he had to do something "radical" regarding the airport to convince average citizens that he was taking the issue seriously. Even if pilot error or mechanical failure were found to be at fault (as appears to

be the case), he still felt that he had to close down Toncontin indefinitely. Zelaya said that if he did not close it down and another plane were to crash, he would be removed from the presidency.

¶4. (C) On May 31, DATT and MilGrp representatives accompanied JTF-B officers in a briefing of Honduran Armed Forces (HOAF) personnel, Civil Aviation Authorities, and commercial airport representatives (Inter-Airports is the company with the current 20-year contract for control of all commercial airports). During the early morning briefing, all of the necessary requirements for commercialization were explained to the visitors, who seemed to understand how difficult it would be to fill these requirements quickly. The requirements included but are not limited to:

- A) ramp: integrity; capacity; illumination; security; etc.
- B) legal: contracts; airline agreements; bilateral agreements; concessionaires; etc.
- C) private services: fuel; ramp service; fire and rescue; security; etc.
- D) public services: customs; immigration; DGAC (ramp and tower control); OIRSA (equivalent of Department of Agriculture); police (including explosive and drug detection); flight planning; COSESNA (air traffic control); airport transportation; waiting room

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E) Aeronautical: navigational aids; radio frequencies; instrument approaches

F) General electricity; water; sewage; telephone; fiber optics; transportation; parking; concessions

G) Long term permanent needs: Environmental impact; public services; construct a terminal; soil and land studies; transportation and highway design

But when Zelaya arrived for his briefing, these same individuals were unwilling to stand up and tell the President that the airstrip could not be converted into a commercial airport quickly. The only exception was Carlos Ramos, President of Inter-Airports, who laid out a very realistic list of all the issues that needed to be addressed before any commercial flights could land at or take off from Soto Cano. Following the briefing, Zelaya announced to the press that Soto Cano would be ready to handle commercial flights in "30 - 60 days."

Comment

¶5. (C) Our public line has been that the base is Honduran and that we are guests there. It is important that Honduran citizens be the ones to stand up and argue why the airstrip at Soto Cano cannot be commercialized in 30 - 60 days, because if we are the ones leading the charge then Zelaya can blame it all on us and we will be the scapegoat. We are saying that the airport at Toncontin is approved by the International Civil Aviation Organization and the U.S. Transportation Security Administration to operate international commercial flights (while Soto Cano is not) and that as soon as the airport is re-opened, the flights to and from the United States can resume. It is important to get out the message that an airstrip does not constitute an "airport" and that Soto Cano does not have the infrastructure to receive regular commercial flights. Zelaya and his team are also emphasizing that the situation is an "emergency" and Soto Cano must therefore be made ready for commercial flights as soon as possible. We are countering this argument by saying that on the day of the accident, if there had been planes in the air looking to land, it would have indeed been deemed an emergency and those aircraft would certainly have

been allowed to land at Soto Cano. Airlines now know that Toncontin is closed and they can make decisions on whether to land at other locations (San Pedro Sula) or to cancel their flights altogether -- the situation is no longer an emergency. In addition, the public must understand that once Soto Cano is opened to commercial flights, the airlines still have the prerogative to decide whether it is commercially feasible for them to use it. To further exacerbate this volatile situation, Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega landed at Soto Cano on May 31, and is gushing to the press that Soto Cano is a wonderful base that belongs exclusively to Honduras, and that the strip is perfect and will make an excellent new international airport.

¶6. (C) Comment continued: As early as his 2004 presidential campaign, Zelaya was already publicly saying the airstrip at Soto Cano should be commercialized. He has just seized on the Taca 390 crash as a reason to move forward full speed ahead. Add to this the urging of Ortega, who sees it as the perfect way to get the U.S. military out of his backyard for good. While some in the business community also favor opening Soto Cano for commercial use, at least for air cargo, and some "persons on the street" in nearby Comayagua are quoted in the papers as favoring the idea because of its potential impact on local employment, there does not appear to be much popular support for Zelaya's rush to transfer

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flights from Toncontin. Soto Cano is a harrowing two-hour drive from Tegucigalpa in midday traffic and congestion and delays will only become worse when MCC-finance work begins later this year to widen and improve the road. Over the weekend, one person died in an auto accident coming from San Pedro Sula airport, where their flight was diverted to, on the same highway that serves Soto Cano. In addition, a taxi to Soto Cano currently costs over USD 60. Toncontin is a treacherous and outdated airport. A 2-4 year plan to replace it with a safe, modern facility potentially makes sense. An ill-conceived, politically-motivated rush job does not. End comment.

FORD